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Time and gender influence in sexual behavior of Romanian adolescents

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Abstract

Our study tries to establish if the young generation starts sexual activity earlier, under mass media and social pressure, and if the gender is a relevant influence factor in this context. A questionnaire-based survey was developed in order to evaluate the potential relationship between psychological traits and behavior implying risk for people health. The questionnaire was distributed and we received valid responses from a number of 1,364 people (536 male and 828 female). Using SPSS one way ANOVA we found a significant difference determinate by gender regarding the age of sexual activity start.

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1. Introduction

Adolescence is one of the most provocative and challenging period of human life, a time when most of people start building adult identity, experience important new feeling and behavior, like love and sex. The changes in physical and psychological level are tremendous for majority of adolescents and the influence of family, culture and peer group could state the difference between adaptive and maladaptive integration of this changes. One important challenge for adolescents is the sexual attitude and sexual behavior. Coleman & Roker (1998) mention that adolescent sexual behavior is linked with body development and hormonal changes in puberty that affect sex drives. This natural maturation is important but not necessarily determinant for adolescent sexual activity, because the peer

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group, familial, social and cultural factors play a key role in how this kind of behavior is constructed. After puberty a child is biologically ready for sexual activity, but emotionally he/she is in a discovery phase, related more to instability, exploration and change. Florsheim (2003) considers that how romance and sexual behavior runs in adolescence will influence how adult relationship related with romance and sexual activity will be.

Regarding adolescent sexual behavior, people generally assign an important gender difference between girls and boys. It is widespread the idea that boys cannot control their sex drive, but girls can. (Coleman & Roker, 1998). This concept can create pressure on boys and girls to push themselves to behave in an “expected” way, to fulfill especially the peer group expectation.

Because sexual activity is a private type of activity, subject to serious social, cultural, legal and religious constraint and pressure, to measure it is a real challenge (Fenton, 2001). A lot of data came from surveys and questionnaires’ and therefore extra attention is needed when the subjects are adolescents, because their answers depend more on social and peer group desirability.

Koyle, Jensen, Olsen & Cundick (1989), using a sample of 26.230 students, have determined that protective factors identified for other health risk behavior are the same in case of early start of sexual activity. The lower level of sexual activity of adolescents appears highly associated with dual-parent family, greater religiosity, high parental expectations (only for boys), absence of suicidal ideation and higher socioeconomic status. In the same time, high level of body pride was associated with high level of sexual activity. Edgardh (2000), using national samples of 17 years girls born in 1973, shows that 64% of them have already had first intercourse and 16% started early sexual activity (before age 15). The early starters reported a perceived social age exceeding their chronological age by two years, menarche at age 11 or earlier, having more sexual partners in time and a higher incidence of sexual abuse and unintended pregnancy than those later starters. Finer & Philbin (2013), using national representative data, analyze sexual initiation and contraceptive usage among US adolescents. They report that for teens aged 12 years and younger, sexual activity is quite rare and most is non-consensual, but 30% of those aged 15 had sex. Majority of this teens didn’t use any contraceptive method when they had first time sex and didn’t use contraceptive methods long time after. In 2014, Guttmacher Institute reports that in USA 16% of adolescents had sex by age of 15, one-third had sex by age of 16, more than 48% had sex by 17 and 61% of 18 –year-old. The same source found little gender difference in the timing of first time sex and a longer waiting before having sex before 2006.

In Romania the general idea before 1990 was that first sex must wait for marriage. For that, young people were both under ideological and moral/social pressure to avoid sex before marriage. The 1989 revolution has stopped the ideological pressure and the new created media started to distribute lots of sexual contents. Now the “old” generations who grow-up before 1990 consider that “new” generations are too libertine and this affects individual and social morale. Meekers, Holscher & Munteanu (1997), using WHO narrative method, reveal that in 1997 Romanian adolescents became interested in some sexually related activities between the age 11 and 16 years. An UNICEF study (2013) regarding Romanian adolescents situation mentions that as average, they started sexual activity at 15,5 year and they used condoms in half of cases. In an unexpected way, the adolescents living in rural area report to use more frequent condom than teens leaving in urban areas. Kállay, Craciun, Vonas & Baban (2011) reveal that the percentage of boys who became sexually active is higher up till age of 15, after this age the percentage of girls sexually active became higher. In the same time, more than 31% of boys and 54% of girls had sex by the age of 15. Using cross-comparative national results, the study emphasizes that in 2006 the percentage of 15 years Romanian adolescents already having sexual activity is lower than in Greece, Bulgaria, Denmark, but higher than in Italy, Slovenia and Hungary.

In the last decades in Europe seems that both the attitude and the explicit sexual behavior of adolescents has dramatically change. In UK, for example, twenty percent of 13 year olds pupils reported some form of sexual contact with a partner, with a degree of sexual activity increasing with age (Burack, 1999). The age to start sexual activity is critical, because becoming sexual active at a younger age is related with the limited capacity to evaluate risks in doing so. The early start of sexual activity could be related with high future number of coital partners, risk of sexual diseases and unprotected sex/pregnancy (Edgardh, 2000).

Our study tries to establish if the common sense supposition that young generation starts early sexual activity under mass media and social pressure is true in Romania in the last twenty years and if the gender is a relevant influence factor in this context. In the same time we try to establish if the early start of sexual activity is related with the risk of having unprotected sex.

2. Participants and method

A questionnaire-based survey was developed by „Francisc I. Rainer” Institute of Anthropology, Romanian Academy, in order to evaluate the potential relationship between psychological traits and behavior implying risk for people health. The questionnaire was distributed and we received valid responses from a number of 1,364 people (536 male and 828 female; average age is 22,71 years and the standard deviation is 3,128). For this study we selected only the relevant items regarding the moment when the subjects started sexual activity, the number of sexual partners, etc. We grouped the subject age variable in three categories (under 20/born in and after 1994 – 30,1%, between 20 and 25/born between 1989 and 1993 – 49,1% and over 25/born in and before 1988 – 20,7%) in order to observe the influence of time on targeted behaviors. From these three clusters we consider that the third and second cluster are most probable representative for “old fashion” attitude regarding sex and sexual activity, and the first one is most probable representative for the “new generation”, born and growing up without ideological pressure.

3. Findings

Mean age for starting sexual activity was 17,68 years and SD was 1,92 (min. value 9 year and max value 26 year), for the 1.155 subjects who give valid answers to this question (209 missing value: 7 subject didn't answer, 1 system error and 201 answer “not the case”). Using SPSS one way ANOVA we found a significant difference determined by subjects distribution in three age groups by the age to start sexual activity, $F(2,1152) = 17,171$, $p < 0.00$. The mean difference between category 2 and 3 isn't significant, but the difference between category 1 and both category 2 and 3 are significant.

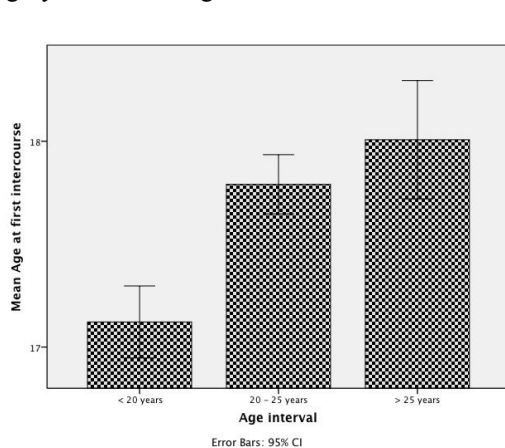


Figure 1. Age Interval Influence on Age at First Intercourse

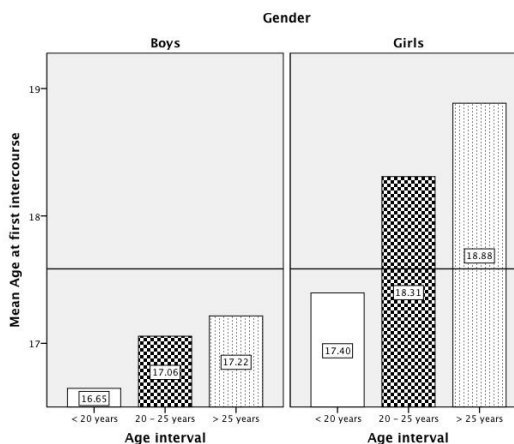


Figure 2. Gender and Age Interval Influence

Generally speaking, the adolescents born after 1994 seem to start early the sexual activity, situation in Romania being similar to that of most European countries. We also find a significant difference determined by gender regarding the age to start sexual activity $F(1,1153) = 112,605$, $p < 0.00$.

In the last twenty years seems that girls changed significantly their age for starting sexual activity, the mean having the most relevant dropping for this subjects category. Analyzing database by gender, we conclude that both for girls ($F(8,655) = 3,215$, $p < 0.001$) and boys ($F(9,315) = 4,40$, $p < 0.00$) an important factor influencing the age of first intercourse is the age at first menarche/pollution. Regarding socioeconomic situation of subjects, Romanian data confirm Koyle, Jensen, Olsen & Cundick (1989) supposition that socioeconomic situation of adolescent family's is a significant factor regarding sexual activity, but in Romania appear that this relationship is reversed: the youth from high-income families seem to start faster sexual activity.

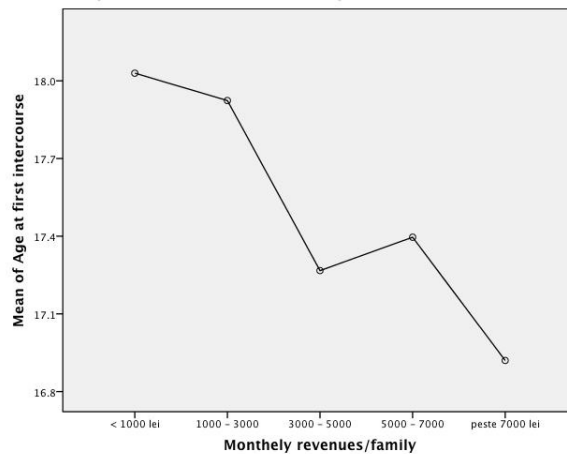


Figure 3. Revenue influence on Age at first intercourse

Analyzing database by age interval, we found that for group 1 and 2 the bivariate correlation between the age of first intercourse and the number of sexual partners isn't significant, but it is for the third group. So it is possible that this factor has a significant influence, but only on medium and long term. One Way ANOVA reveal that age of first intercourse could be a influencing factor on using protection at first intercourse ($F(15,730) = 1,969$, $p < 0.015$). Like in other country, the early start of sexual activity seems to be related with a more unsafe sexual behavior and high future number of sexual partners (probably related with immaturity and lack of information at early age).

4. Conclusion

The gender appear to be a relevant factor regarding the moment to start sexual activity for adolescents (the mean for male is 17,2 year and SD is 1,785 and the mean for female is 18,18 year and SD is 1,875), Also in the last twenty years, the average age to start sexual activity drops from 18,1 year (SD=1,92) for people having now more than 25 years, to 17,1 for people having under 20 years at the moment of questioning them (SD = 1,48). The age dropping is more relevant for female that for male. The conclusion is in line with other research on Romanian adolescents sexual activity (see Kállay, Craciun, Vonas & Baban (2011) and Meekers, Holscher & Munteanu (1997)), but also with international studies: factors as age at first menarche/pollution (Edgardh, 2000), gender and social attitude/available information or pressure are significant for adolescents regarding sexual attitude and behavior. The strong relationship between age of first intercourse and the tendency to have unsafe sexual behavior emphasis the importance of information, education and emotional/psychological support for adolescents.

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